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American Newspaper Publishers Association

ANPA NEWS RESEARCH REPORT

A REPORT FOR EDITORS FROM THE ANPA NEWS RESEARCH CENTER No. 40 December 30, 1983

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"The Effects of Bad News and Good News On Newspaper and Community Images"

By Jack B. Haskins

HIGHLIGHTS: The comparative effects of five versions of a newspaper differing in the amount of good news and bad news were tested in a laboratory experiment with 220 college students ages 18 to 34. The bad news/good news balance had highly significant effects on 15 of the 16 newspaper image characteristics and 21 of the 22 community image characteristics measured in this study.

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The Effects of Bad News and Good News on Newspaper and Community Images

By Jack B. Haskins

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Does an excessive amount of bad news have a negative effect on the reader's image of the newspaper carrying it? Or on the reader's image of the community from which the newspaper originates? This experiment was aimed at answering these questions.

Since anyone or anything associated with an unpleasant stimulus often comes to be perceived more negatively, it seems likely that bad news may tarnish the reader's attitude toward and image of the carrying newspaper. In light of the relatively low credibility and declining market penetration of U.S. newspapers, particularly among young adults, it seems important to investigate the possible role of excessive bad news in this regard.

It's also reasonable that the local newspaper's content may affect a reader's attitude toward and image of the community, especially a relatively unfamiliar community. The mobility of the U.S. population makes this a problem to be reckoned with.

Summary of Results

While experiments are, in one sense, highly artificial, at the same time they also provide highly rigorous evidence of effects. This experiment, sponsored by the ANPA News Research Center, was designed to test hypotheses that the relative amounts of bad news and good news in a newspaper have corresponding effects on perceptions of the community of origin and the carrying newspaper.

• The hypotheses were overwhelmingly verified. The bad/good news balance had highly significant corresponding effects on 21 of 22 community image characteristics and on 15 of 16 newspaper characteristics. In short, bad news has negative effects and good news has positive effects on the subjects' perceptions of the community-of-origin and of the carrying newspaper.

• Bad news also created negative perceptions of the newspaper on both news-related characteristics (e.g., constructive approach, good influence on community, bias, realistic balance, etc.) and general characteristics (e.g., trustworthy advertising, desirability of subscribing, editorial staff competence, etc.)

• Bad news created a negative image of the community not only on characteristics directly related to the news topics (e.g., safety, crime and violence, law enforcement, etc.), but also on general characteristics unrelated to news content (e.g., standard of living, neighborhood attractiveness, clean environment, etc.). Good news had corresponding positive effects on both news-related and unrelated characteristics.

• Most ratings tended to be lowest for the "very bad news" issue, after which the ratings either declined slightly or remained about the same for the "very good news" issue.

Experimental Newspapers

One of the most important and painstaking parts of the study was the creation of five newspaper issues, varying *only* in the degree of negative-positive news content while holding all other newspaper and community variables constant. Clearly, the issues had to be as identical as possible on such elements as layout, advertising content, subject-matter of the news stories, news origin (local, domestic, foreign) and, to the extent possible, in the specific news events presented. Since no existing "real" newspaper could fulfill these requirements, it was necessary to create five fictitious, but realistic, *experimental* issues.

Within the budgetary limits, it was decided to create and print four-page tabloid-size issues (pages 1, 2, 15 and 16 from an ostensible 16-page small-community newspaper). From the presumably unfamiliar and non-newsy Midwest, the colorless community of "Compton, Nebraska, just an average small Midwestern town," was created out of thin air.

Other criteria specified and fulfilled for the five issues were as follows. Layout was identical in terms of the logotype, number and size of stories and headlines, pictorial matter, placement, typeface and all other visually apparent makeup and layout variables. In each issue, the 35 percent of space devoted to advertising consisted of identical ads in identical locations. A realistic balance of news subject-matter, identical in all issues, must be presented in the 30 stories/headlines contained in each issue. To this end, recent content analysis of U.S. newspapers by the Newspaper Advertising Bureau (1978) were used as the criterion in arriving at the approximate proportions of news by *story origin* and *subject-matter*, the proportions identical in all five issues.

Table 1

Mean Ratings of Five Experimental Issues*

	Mean rating	n
(T1) "Extremely bad news" issue	-2.27	31
(T2) "Bad news" issue	-1.69	60
(T3) "Neutral" issue	+0.15	49
(T4) "Good news" issue	+1.37	54
(T5) "Extremely good news" issue	+2.06	26
		220

*Rated on a 7-step scale ranging from minus 3 ("the worst possible news") to plus 3 ("the best possible news").

The five issues varied systematically in the overall negative-positive dimension from "Extremely bad news" (Treatment 1), to "Bad news" (Treatment 2), to "Neutral news" (Treatment 3), to "Good news" (Treatment 4) to "Extremely good news" (Treatment 5), as shown in Table. 1.

The experimental treatments and a questionnaire were administered to 220 students enrolled in two sections of a freshman course at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville:

- 94 percent were in the 18-24 age group and all were under 35
- 95 percent were single
- 38 percent worked for pay, either part-time or full-time
- 11 percent were household heads
- 56 percent were female, 44 percent male
- 87 percent claimed either moderate or high interest in news (13 percent claimed no interest or a slight interest)

Table 2

Composite Newspaper and Community Images*

News Treatment	Newspaper Image[1]	Community Image[2]
"Very bad news"	2.12	2.31
"Bad news"	2.51	2.78
"Neutral news"	2.93	3.19
"Good news"	3.16	3.38
"Very good news"	3.03	3.38

[1]Mean score across 16 characteristics
[2]Mean score across 22 characteristics
*Means from a 1-5 scale with 1 = "one of the worst communities" and 5 = "one of the best communities."

- 58 percent claimed religion was very important or "the most important thing" in their lives (20 percent said most important, 38 percent very important, 28 percent fairly important, 14 percent not very important).

The distribution of students across the five experimental treatments was completely random, so that the groups of respondents receiving each version of the newspaper were equivalent in terms of all demographic and personality variables.

This extremely homogeneous group of students is, of course, not representative of the adult population or of newspaper readers in general. However, as is the case with most other experimental studies using students, it is assumed that the *relative effects* of the experimental treatments are projectable to the larger

Table 3

Effects of Bad and Good News on Perceptions of the Newspaper

(Note: Listed in rank order of magnitude of the effects. F-value reflects significance of the difference in the five treatments.)

Newspaper Characteristic	F-value
Good influence on the community (A)	44
Suitable for children to read (B)	43
Emphasizes a constructive and positive view of events (A)	43
Genuine concern for community well-being (C)	34
Provides a feeling of satisfaction (C)	18
Friendliness to the reader (C)	16
Realistic balance of both good and bad happenings (A)	16
Kind of newspaper you would like to subscribe to (C)	13
Effectively serves as a "community watchdog" (B)	6
Trustworthy news reports (B)	6
Concentrates on covering only important events (B)	4
Overall competence of reporters and editors (D)	4
Unbiased coverage of the news (B)	3
Trustworthy advertising (D)	3
Lively and interesting source of information (C)	3
Attractiveness of appearance (D)	NS
Composite image, all 16 newspaper characteristics	32

A,B,C,D represent relationship between characteristic and news content

A = directly related to news negative-positive dimension
B = objective assessment of newspaper by subject in "expert" role
C = subjective response to newspaper in "feeling" role
D = nonvariable characteristic of newspaper issues (same in all issues)

population. In addition, evidence on newspaper *effects* is important for understanding this young and prosperous segment of the population who are of great importance to the newspaper industry.

Effects on Newspaper Image

The "Very bad news" issue tended to produce the lowest newspaper image ratings. The ratings then improved steadily, with the "Bad," "Neutral" and "Good" issues. But with the "Very good news" issue, there tended to be a decline in ratings, which might be labeled the "too good to be true" effect. Table 2 shows the composite image for all newspaper traits combined for each of the five news treatments.

Table 3 shows all 16 newspaper image characteristics in rank order of the magnitude of effects, as indicated by the size of the "F" value. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) "F" value directly reflects the magnitude of effects and the differences created by the bad/good news variation. Analysis of variance is a statistical technique to determine if the differences among the newspaper versions are due to chance (statistically non-significant) or so large that the differences are most likely not due to chance (statistically significant).

In Table 3 the strongest effects were created on the newspaper characteristics "Good influence on the community," "Suitable for children to read," "Emphasizes a constructive and positive view of events," and "Genuine concern for community well-being." Fifteen of the 16 newspaper characteristics were significantly affected. The only one not affected was "Attractiveness of appearance."

The newspaper image characteristics may be classified into four subjective categories—those directly related to the negative-positive dimension of news (A, three characteristics), objective assessment of the newspaper (B, five characteristics), subjective response to the newspaper (C, five characteristics), and nonvariable characteristics of the newspaper (D, three characteristics).

The greatest effects were created on the directly-related characteristics, the smallest on the nonvariable characteristics (editorial competence, trustworthy advertising, attractive appearance). Subjective-response effects were generally larger than objective-assessment effects. The traits in Table 3 were identified as A, B, C and D to document those conclusions.

Table 4 shows the 16 newspaper characteristics in the order seen by the respondents in their questionnaires, along with the mean ratings for each of the five newspaper issues.

Effects of Demographic and Personality Variables

It was hypothesized that the effects of the different newspaper issues on community image and newspaper image would either be enhanced or diminished by various demographic and personality characteris-

Table 4

Newspaper Image Mean Values by Newspaper Treatments

"Now what is your rating of this newspaper in terms of . . ."	Newspaper Issue/Treatment						
	All combined	Very bad	Bad	Neutral	Good	Very good	F-value
Attractiveness/appearance?	2.85	2.88	2.83	2.80	2.89	2.92	0.2*
Unbiased coverage of events?	2.83	2.44	2.78	2.96	2.89	3.08	3.2
Friendliness to the reader?	3.11	2.50	2.86	3.29	3.45	3.38	15.9
Realistic balance of both good and bad happenings?	2.37	1.50	2.10	2.76	2.64	2.81	15.5
Overall competence of editors and reporters?	2.77	2.50	2.67	2.90	2.95	2.69	3.6
Provides a feeling of satisfaction?	2.50	1.81	2.16	2.57	2.93	3.12	17.5
Good influence on the community?	2.79	1.66	2.30	3.18	3.41	3.31	43.6
Trustworthy advertising?	3.10	2.91	2.97	3.12	3.23	3.31	2.9
Lively and exciting source of information?	2.39	2.25	2.29	2.20	2.64	2.62	2.9
Suitable for children to read?	2.82	1.53	2.37	3.16	3.59	3.23	43.4
Genuine concern for community well-being?	3.02	2.00	2.56	3.39	3.57	3.54	33.6
Concentrates on covering only important events?	2.65	2.19	2.67	2.90	2.59	2.81	4.4
Trustworthy news reports?	2.90	2.44	2.81	3.12	3.02	3.00	5.6
Emphasizes constructive and positive view of events?	2.71	1.59	2.19	3.00	3.43	3.23	42.6
Effectively serves as a community watchdog?	2.86	2.34	2.73	3.08	3.11	2.88	6.4
The kind of newspaper you would like to subscribe to?	2.12	1.38	1.83	2.27	2.63	2.42	13.0

*Not significant. All other F-values highly significant.

tics, as well as by "general news interest" and "religiosity."

To test these hypotheses, two-way analyses of variance were conducted using each of those variables separately.

The results showed, in summary, that *none* of the demographic intervening variables had a significant effect. That is, the news treatment effects were the same regardless of *class level* (freshman vs. others), *sex* (male vs. female), *work status* (job vs. no job), *kind of residence* (owners vs. renters), *general news interest* (slight vs. moderate vs. high) or *importance of religion* (most important, very important, fairly important or not important).

Additionally, none of the personality variables had a significant effect. The treatment effects were the same regardless of *extraversion* (high vs. moderate vs. low), *emotional stability* (high vs. moderate vs. low), and *tough-mindedness* (high vs. moderate vs. low).

It is conceivable that different results might be obtained in a more heterogeneous group. The present experimental group was extremely homogeneous in terms of age, socio-economic status and religious affiliation.

Effects on Community Image

For the 22 community image traits, the general pattern was for the "Very bad news" issue to produce the lowest ratings, with gradually and steadily improving ratings for the "Bad," "Neutral" and "Good" issues, and with little or no improvement for the "Very good" issue. Table 2 shows the composite image for all characteristics combined, expressing this common pattern.

Table 5 shows all 22 community image characteristics in rank order of the magnitude of effects. Also shown is the ANOVA (analysis of variance) "F" value which reflects directly the magnitude of effects and the differences created by the bad/good news variation. Analysis of variance is a statistical technique to determine if the differences among issues are due to chance (non-significant) or so large that differences are not due to chance (significant).

The strongest effects were created on "Good place to raise children," "Traffic safety," "Overall rating of whole community," "Health and happiness" and "Freedom from crime and violence." However, 21 of the 22 community characteristics were strongly affected beyond the .01 probability level—i.e., highly significant. The only community characteristic not significantly affected was "Recreation and leisure activities."

Some of the community characteristics were specifically related to the bad news content (A), some were generally related to content (B), and some were considered unrelated to content (C). These relationships are indicated in Table 5.

The strongest effects were created, as expected, on characteristics specifically related to the news (Mean F = 29.5); the weakest effects were achieved on news-unrelated characteristics (Mean F = 11.3). The most significant finding, however, was that *bad news created significant negative effects even on community characteristics unrelated to the content of the news.* That is, the tenor of the news had a generalized carryover or "negative halo" effect on almost every aspect of community image—health and happiness, standard of living, attractiveness of neighborhoods, clean air and environment, cost of living, progressiveness, and stores and shopping facilities.

Table 6 shows the 22 community characteristics in the order seen by the respondents, along with the mean ratings of each of the five newspaper issues.

Table 5

Effects of Bad and Good News on Perceptions of the Community

(Note: Listed in rank order of magnitude of the effects. F-value reflects significance of the difference in the five treatments.)

Community Characteristic	F-value
Good place to raise children (B)*	39
Traffic safety (A)	36
Overall rating of whole community (B)	34
Health and happiness (C)	33
Freedom from crime and violence (A)	33
Morality and decency (B)	30
Friendly peaceable neighbors (B)	30
Law enforcement (B)	29
Property safety (A)	27
Good place to live (B)	23
Personal safety to walk streets at night (A)	22
General standard of living (C)	17
Quality of local government (B)	16
Attractive neighborhoods (C)	13
Honest public officials (B)	13
Clean air and environment (C)	11
Employment and prosperity (B)	10
Lack of drug and alcohol problems (B)	10
Reasonable cost of living (C)	8
Progressiveness (C)	4
Stores and shopping facilities (C)	3
Recreation and liesure activities (C)	1.7NS
Composite image, all 22 characteristics	57

*A,B,C represent relationship between characteristic and news content. A = specifically related; B = generally related; C = unrelated.

Discussion

While it is essential for the public to know about some bad news for self-protection and decision making, much of it is irrelevant and unimportant. Journalists may assume that most bad news sells newspapers and attracts audiences. But they may tend to overestimate public interest in bad news.

Another reason for the preponderance of bad news is the traditional system of news beats, which are largely concentrated in community trouble centers—the law enforcement agencies, fire stations, hospitals and the courts. Larger news organizations dispatch special correspondents to cover major disasters, rebellions, wars and latent trouble spots.

Why should journalists be concerned about the emphasis on bad news?

This study shows that a community newspaper emphasizing bad news is perceived by its readers as less desirable to subscribe to, less trustworthy, less important, more biased, less satisfying, less professional and even less effective as a watchdog. It also is seen as a malevolent influence on the community, less suitable for children, less constructive, lacking genuine concern for the community, less lively, less friendly to the reader, less balanced. Even the advertising is deemed less trustworthy.

Due to budget limitations, this study was conducted on young college adults, a market segment of great importance to the newspaper industry, rather than on the general public. These findings should be supplemented by a similar study conducted on a more representative cross-section of newspaper reading adults from the general community.

This study employed only one issue of a fictitious newspaper from a fictitious community unfamiliar to the subject. A more generalizable experiment would use real newspapers over a period of time in real communities by residents of those communities. This could only be done by a controlled field experiment conducted in several communities simultaneously, with systematic variation of the bad and good news content of those newspapers over time. It would require the cooperation of editors in those communities and considerable time and research funds—difficult but possible. □

Table 6

Community Image Mean Values by Newspaper Treatments

"Compared with other cities you have known, how would you rate Compton . . ."	Newspaper Issue/Treatment						
	All combined	Very bad	Bad	Neutral	Good	Very good	F-value
As a good place to live?	2.90	2.03	2.68	2.96	3.33	3.38	23.3
On law enforcement?	2.89	2.06	2.62	3.22	3.24	3.12	28.7
Stores and shopping facilities?	2.91	3.00	2.75	2.92	3.13	2.73	22.9
Clean air and environment?	3.53	2.90	3.42	3.67	3.81	3.69	10.0
Friendly peaceable neighbors?	3.24	2.29	2.90	3.45	3.80	3.58	29.6
Traffic safety?	2.94	1.97	2.60	3.14	3.44	3.46	35.6
Employment and prosperity?	2.91	2.55	2.63	2.83	3.19	3.54	11.1
Personal safety to walk streets at night?	2.94	1.94	2.57	3.39	3.37	3.27	22.3
Quality of local government?	2.91	2.26	2.68	3.14	3.17	3.27	15.9
Morality and decency?	3.24	2.16	2.95	3.51	3.72	3.69	30.1
Recreation and leisure activities?	2.80	2.71	2.63	2.86	2.89	3.04	1.7*
Freedom from crime and violence?	2.89	1.68	2.62	3.29	3.35	3.27	33.1
Attractive neighborhoods?	3.21	2.58	2.95	3.33	3.54	3.65	13.3
Good place to raise children?	3.01	1.74	2.63	3.31	3.61	3.62	38.7
Honest public officials?	3.01	2.35	2.85	3.16	3.31	3.23	12.8
Reasonable cost of living?	3.11	2.77	2.93	3.14	3.35	3.38	7.5
Property safety?	3.05	2.06	2.85	3.35	3.43	3.38	27.1
Progressiveness?	2.71	2.71	2.45	2.67	2.80	3.19	3.8
Lack of drug and alcohol problems?	3.02	2.52	2.78	3.18	3.26	3.38	9.9
General standard of living?	3.09	2.52	2.90	3.14	3.35	3.54	16.5
Health and happiness?	3.19	2.19	2.94	3.39	3.68	3.65	33.4
Overall rating whole community?	3.03	2.09	2.75	3.22	3.48	3.54	34.3

*Not significant. All other F-values highly significant.

Making It Easy To Use 1980 Census Reports

The Commerce Department's Census Bureau is trying to make it easier to use its 250,000 pages of statistics from the 1980 census by publishing a series of "Census '80 Product Primers." Designed for instructional use, these Product Primers include tips on how to use census publications, exercises and technical notes.

Primer No. 1 deals with the first series of final 1980 state population reports entitled "Number of Inhabitants." The four-page primer gives tips on how to use the census books and even includes exercises and sample charts.

Product Primer 2 describes "General Housing Characteristics," HC80-1-A, the first in a series of state reports that measure our nation's housing stock. The reports contain data for counties, metropolitan areas, urban and rural areas, places of 1,000 or more population, and Indian reservations. The Primer introduces several housing concepts and shows how to use HC80-1-A to investigate housing conditions.

"Block Statistics," PHC80-1, is the subject of *Product Primer 3*. "Block Statistics" reports, available only in microfiche form, contain both population and housing information for blocks in cities, towns and certain other areas. The Primer describes the content of the report and explains the block concept. Exercises illustrate the use of "Block Statistics" in survey sampling, and further the user's understanding of how the Census Bureau protects the confidentiality of individuals by "suppressing" certain data items.

Many of the long-awaited sample data items appeared in a series of state reports entitled *Advance Estimates of Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics*, PHC80-S2. *Product Primer 4* reviews the information contained in *Advance Estimates* including family composition, marital status, age, employment, income, housing facilities, year built, size of units and housing costs. The Primer uses a quiz to test your knowledge of population and housing trends and shows how to use the reports to construct an industry employment profile to analyze the local or state economy.

Primer 5 introduces "General Population Characteristics," PC80-1-B. Age, sex, marital status, Spanish origin and household relationship are some of the population items that this report covers. One exercise introduces the concepts of race and Spanish origin and the other shows how to derive such measures as family composition and size.

Primers 6 and 7 feature the two microfiche products that offer complete count and sample estimate data for small areas. When used together, these extracts from Summary Tape Files (STFs) 1 and 3 yield over 200 tables of data for areas as small as enumeration districts and block groups. *Primer 6* features the complete-count data found on STFs 1A and 1C microfiche; *Primer 7* uses a similar format to show sample estimate data found on STFs 3A and 3C. Each Primer includes exercises that show how to derive new variables from these rich resources and facsimilies of the fiche frames so that you can see exactly the data they offer. *Primer 6,* in addition, includes a detailed exercise on the geographic hierarchy. Without this understanding, users cannot locate data on these fiche for a specific areas.

Product Primers are for sale at $1.00 each (25 percent discount for orders of 100 or more going to a single address) from Customer Services (Publications), Data User Services Division, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. 20233. Write to the College Curriculum Support Project, Data User Services Division, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. 20233, to receive examination copies. □

Videotex News Service

The School of Journalism at the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, has been producing a daily videotex news service for Prairie farmers since early 1982. A number of reports on this work are now available from Henry Overduin, senior editor, Westex News, School of Journalism, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, N6A 5B7.

"Westex News: An Experiment in Videotex Journalism."—This is a general description of the Westex News experiment, outlining its purpose, data base organization, news sources and research possibilities.

"Videotex News and Advertising: An Editorial Perspective."—Focusing on the advertising potential of videotex, this paper outlines a suggested "multiple-sponsorship" approach and comments on some of the traditional editorial-advertising conflicts as they may arise in a videotex context.

"The First Six Months of Westex News: March-August, 1982."—This paper reports in some detail on the operations of the first six months. It provides a content analysis, hit list analysis, details of funding, staff comments and reactions, and a brief overview of research in progress. □

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